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Architects and
Architecture (w)

THE CHANGING FACE OF DOWNTOWN TERRE HAUTE: 150 YEARS
OF ARCHITECTURAL AND LAND USE CHANGE

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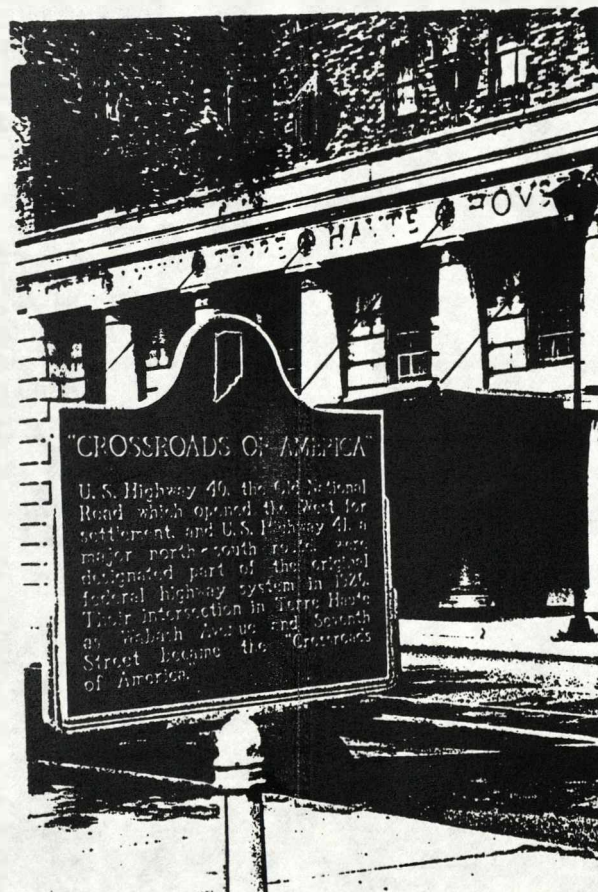
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Terre Haute House, 1928, Wabash and Seventh



Terminal Arcade, 1911, 800 block of Wabash



"Crossroads of America" marker,
Wabash and Seventh



Indiana Theater, 1921,
Ohio and Seventh

"In the American city, every important business address sought a location on Main Street...."

Larry Ford

PROLOGUE

Among remnants of Terre Haute's diminished central business district are traces of an early transformation in orientation. What began as a commercial core arranged around a courthouse square gave way, long ago, to a linear Main Street. A subsequent spread of selected business land use to parallel streets did not change this essential configuration. Prestigious addresses where financial, office, and retail activities concentrated did not stray from Wabash Avenue. First the old National Road and then US 40 followed Wabash maintaining an east and westbound flow of traffic through the city. In Terre Haute as elsewhere, the age of electric interurban railways overlapped with travel by wagon and automobile. Coaches run by the Terre Haute, Indianapolis, and Eastern Traction Company converged from surrounding towns on Wabash Avenue's double tracked line. Local streetcars used the same tracks to bring shoppers and workers downtown. After automobiles became common US 40 was crossed by Highway 41 on Seventh Street. The intersection of two major roads downtown gave rise to the local claim that Terre Haute stood at the "Crossroads of America." Historical markers on two corners of Wabash and Seventh and a nearby cafe calling itself the "Crossroads" represent local efforts to perpetuate the notion that Terre Haute was a central node in the nation's early highway network.

Subsequent reroutings of Highway 40 and US 41 adversely affected the fortunes of downtown Terre Haute. The city's old business center began to decline when Highway 41 was moved to a widened pavement on Third Street. This brought new motels, short order restaurants, and retail establishments that moved to the emerging commercial strip into competition with downtown hotels, eating establishments, and stores. Much more devastating was the opening of Interstate 70 a few miles to the south. When this happened, nearly a quarter of a century ago, a majority of the through traffic was diverted away from Wabash Avenue. Developers immediately took advantage of the site where I 70 and US 41 converge. Their actions were encouraged by the presence of open farm land just below the new highway. As soon as an interchange was in place property here became more accessible and more valuable than real estate in the congested downtown area. What ensued on the lower side of Terre Haute's new crossroads was the creation of Honey Creek Square. This was the city's first enclosed retail mall offering a controlled climate environment and more abundant free parking than any of the city's older

shopping centers. Since Honey Creek opened new motels, restaurants, strip malls, cash and carry building supply outlets, and general merchandise discount stores have continued to gather around it and to spread up and down Highway 41.

Events downtown also contributed to changes in land use intensity and diversity on Wabash Avenue. Urban renewal in the form of condemnation and demolition of old buildings was vigorously pursued during the late 1970s. Thereafter this activity became more sporadic, but did continue. Land clearance peaked when plans were underway for a city center shopping and office complex. Failure to reach consensus among potential participants and a sharp rise in interest rates caused the scheme to be abandoned. Vitality on the main street was reduced further by rerouting what through traffic remained on US 40. Cherry and Ohio, on either side of Wabash, became multiple lane, one way streets meant to carry cars and trucks around the old business district with minimal delay.

CONTEXT

Today only a limited number of retail enterprises continue to function in downtown Terre Haute. They are too few to provide a critical mass capable of attracting substantial numbers of shoppers. City center activities which continue to prosper are those in the service sector: financial institutions, real estate offices, law firms, various branches of government, and eating and drinking establishments. With most retail activities gone land set aside for parking the cars of office workers and clients is equivalent to that on which buildings still stand. If vacant lots and empty structures are factored in what remains can only be described as a low density business district. And this does not take into account the large amount of unused or under utilized space on the upper stories of older buildings. However, the kinds of changes affecting Wabash Avenue are not at all peculiar to Terre Haute. Main streets throughout the United States have undergone a similar transition as demonstrated by the ubiquitous presence of: broken rows of buildings, a chaotic mix of architectural styles, structures inconsistent in scale, and large areas of off-street parking or idle land. Here and there vegetation has also been introduced where it was not seen during earlier decades when high density land use prevailed in old central business districts.

Architectural and land use changes visible on Wabash Avenue can best be understood in the context of values basic to our national identity. Wilbur Zelinsky observed that American society places a premium on individualism, mobility and change, and mechanical solutions to all sorts of problems. Landscapes characterized by such traits as formlessness, an emphasis on individual components, extremes in scale, continuous demolition, and segmental preservation are what David Lowenthal saw as a

mirror of the values we hold in common. Machine space is how Ronald Horvath described the considerable amount of land in any American city dedicated to the movement, servicing, and parking of automobiles. The comparatively recent introduction of open areas filled with shrubs, trees, and grass is something Joseph Wood referred to as a process of suburbanizing downtowns. Being a mobile people, who are increasingly prone to abandon their inner cities, Americans have come to see elements of suburban landscapes as an antidote to urban ills. Perhaps we are creating a version of Frank Lloyd Wright's utopian Broadacre City in downtown areas by default. Wright advocated the establishment of new cities in which differently designed structures used for diverse purposes would be set apart by extensive green spaces. Efficient movement from one area to another was to occur primarily by means of automobiles traversing carefully designed roads.

ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS ALONG WABASH AVENUE AND NEARBY

1. 219 Ohio Street - The Kessler Law practice recently refurbished Terre Haute's oldest commercial building. This mid-1830s structure stands on the south side of the old courthouse square and provides the downtown area with an architectural history spanning more than 150 years. Consistent with its age the edifice occupies a narrow lot and is only two stories tall. Also appropriate in the Middle West as late as the 1830s was a Greek Revival facade dominated, in this example, by a triangular pediment resting upon four Ionic columns. The substantial look of the building made it a fitting home for Terre Haute's branch of the State Bank of Indiana. Located inland across the National Road this structure is a scaled down imitation of the Second Bank of the United States built a decade earlier (1818-24) in Philadelphia.

2. Reminiscent of another Philadelphia landmark is the Vigo County Courthouse completed during the railroad era in 1888. Designed by Cincinnati architects, Samuel Hannaford and Sons, this lavishly decorated French Second Empire building resembles Philadelphia's Centennial era City Hall, begun in 1871. Built at a time when county government was more important than today the three story courthouse is an example of monumental public architecture. It is faced with limestone and appears unusually tall with an above ground basement, mansard roofed attic, and soaring clock tower. Visually incongruent is a recently built annex on the north side of what was Wabash Avenue prior to its closing between Third Street and the river. This predominantly horizontal structure is faced with red brick, devoid of decorative details, and has a flat roof. As if to add insult to injury its back wall, broken only by narrow jail windows, faces downtown. A no frills annex reflects both the diminished prestige of county politics and the reluctance of elected officials to raise taxes.

3. City Hall faces the courthouse across from what was the west side of the square before the removal of Second Street between Ohio and Cherry. This depression era building is a comparatively modest structure in terms of scale and amount of architectural decoration. While making only a subdued display of Art Deco design the city building's limestone exterior and modest setbacks provide some continuity with the older county edifice.

4. For several decades the Saratoga Cafe has occupied the ground floor of adjacent structures on the southwest corner of Wabash and Fifth. These buildings, and an adjacent unit were erected beneath a continuous mansard roof in 1876. All three segments have lost their projecting attic dormers, but each retains its distinctive second and third story details as refacing has been confined to street level. Classical revival features found only on the corner edifice reveal that it originally housed a bank, Terre Haute First National.

5. At 511 Wabash, the Cox, Zwerner, Gambill and Sullivan law practice recently moved into a 100 year old building, but only after restoring the structure to its late 1920s condition. Occupying a pair of seventeen foot lots this edifice was erected for the First National Bank in 1893. Its Neo-Classical design, provided by a Chicago architect, is expressed in Corinthian columns and a low relief pediment. More than coincidence was probably involved in selecting this style at a time when the Columbian Exposition was attracting throngs of visitors to Chicago. Most of the fair's larger pavilions displayed classically inspired designs and are credited with reviving a preference for architecture based on ancient Roman and Greek models. In 1928 the bank was remodelled inside and out to give it a more modern look while retaining the basic design. Weary and Alford of Chicago, who were well known designers of banks in the Middle West, planned and supervised the changes.

6. Around 1914 Terre Haute acquired a modern fireproof hotel in which all 250 guest rooms had private baths. Street walls of the eight story Hotel Deming presented a Classical Revival look to passersby at Sixth and Cherry. Hidden from view was a deep back court for admitting daylight and air to rooms on the inner side of the building's U shaped corridors. Special facilities included barber and beauty shops and a billiards parlor in the basement. After a new Terre Haute House was built at the intersection of US 40 and Highway 41 the Deming acquired a garage on Cherry Street for storing guests' automobiles.

7. The city's only commercial skyscraper opened in 1922 when the Citizen's Trust Company moved into a new twelve story building at 19 South Six. Several coal mining companies originally leased high rent space on the twelfth floor. Although a slender structure the Citizens Trust Building is still tall enough to give its owner and tenants an exceptionally visible business address. What can be interpreted from the two story height of adjacent structures is the fact that an anticipated advertising advantage rather than the high cost of real estate must have prompted high-rise construction at this site. After being sold to a new owner in the 1930s Classical Revival details at the base of the building were replaced with Art Deco features. Today this structure is known as the Sycamore Building.

8. In how many city centers can you point to a building from which the upper floors disappeared? Today, Terre Haute Savings Bank occupies a one story structure at Sixth and Ohio. In 1911 the bank moved into a six floor edifice on this site. For some years a wholesale dry goods firm rented considerable floor space upstairs. In 1972, when there were no longer any tenants housed above its quarters the bank had all but the ground floor razed.

9. A year after Terre Haute Savings erected its six story building a more modest edifice emerged on another corner of Sixth and Ohio. Between 1912 and 1937 Terre Haute's morning newspaper was printed in the four story Star Building. Today, the major tenant of this Classical Revival structure is a real estate firm.

10. Anonymous Corporate Modern might aptly describe the style of First Financial Plaza at Wabash and Sixth. This sprawling, four story, limestone faced building has so sleek an exterior that pigeons can find no place to roost. It is a latter day version of the International style, but lacks the open glass and steel exterior championed by immigrant Bauhaus architects Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe. Instead, there are alternating horizontal bands of glass and stone. Referring to the structure as a plaza is appropriate for it is set back from the sidewalk in a manner similar to modern New York City skyscrapers. As in New York the setback allows room for a piece of public space where there are trees, flowers, and benches. Flanking the building and extending all the way back to Ohio Street is a customer parking lot with a landscaped fringe. On one side there is also a drive through banking facility for this edifice houses Terre Haute First National Bank. The area the building and surrounding lots occupy is almost equal to a city block. Here is where a downtown shopping and office mall was intended to go before the plan was abandoned. First Financial Plaza was erected in 1988 as designed by Craig Schwartz, an architect with HBE Bank Facilities of St. Louis.

11. The former headquarters building of Terre Haute First National is just up the street at 643 Wabash on a narrow lot typical of an earlier era. This structure with a height equivalent to three stories was built for the Union Trust Company in 1904. Its architect Solon S. Beman had previously designed buildings for George Pullman's company town where railway sleeping cars were built. Terre Haute native Eugene Debs was a leader in the strike staged by Pullman workers several years before Beman received his commission to draw plans for the local bank. His building was substantially remodelled in 1927 after being acquired by the newly formed Terre Haute National Bank and Trust Company. This change in appearance is probably what prompted the rival First National and McKeen Bank at 511 Wabash to modernize its building a year later. The new facade at 643 Wabash was dominated by an arched Beaux Arts entry. Inside, the banking chamber was also redecorated with murals painted by Vincent Aderante, a Neapolitan immigrant with studio in New York City. These murals were recently restored and the building is now home to the local Chamber of Commerce. It seems fitting that this old, but well maintained structure also provides quarters for a regional office of Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana.

12. Located across the street at 686 Wabash is downtown Terre Haute's other new commercial structure. Similar to First Financial Plaza this edifice displays an adaptation of the International style. More striking than the architecture is a small scale replica of a suburban office park in front and on both sides of the building. A lawn with trees and shrubs occupies the setback area out front. As along big city beltways there is not only frontal green space, but peripheral parking. This edifice was built to house the local office of IBM Corporation, but after recent nation-wide downsizing of its work force the company moved out. Local health care agencies are the current tenants.

13. The Terre Haute House is strategically positioned at Seventh and Wabash, the city's officially designated "crossroads" intersection. In 1928 this ten story Classical Revival structure replaced an older inn bearing the same name. The designer was William Earl Russ, an Indianapolis architect. Its monumental proportions allowed the hotel to function as a visual counterpoise to the courthouse at the other end of downtown. When new this facility proudly advertised 250 guest rooms with outside windows. Having a ball room that could seat 1400 people the Terre Haute House superseded the Deming as a favorite setting for formal dances and other grand social events. It also provided sample rooms for traveling salesmen, contained a barber shop, and operated a storage garage for cars of overnight guests. No longer able to compete with newer motels the Terre Haute House was closed more than twenty years ago and continues to stand vacant.

14. Almost a skyscraper at a height of eight stories is the Merchants Bank Building on a corner of Wabash opposite the Terre Haute House. When completed in 1908 this was the tallest office building in the city. For several years its first owner, Terre Haute Trust Company, and their tenants could claim to do business at the most prestigious address downtown. Today Classical Revival details give this edifice a dated look, but Merchants has responded to the new First Financial Plaza by acquiring adjacent land in two directions for customer parking space and a drive through banking facility.

15. Down Seventh Street, between Wabash and Ohio, is the three story Swope Block. The upper floors of this 1904 building retain a Classical Revival facade. In 1924 the Swope Art Gallery moved into a portion of this edifice. Known as the Swope Museum today this organization now occupies a majority of the structure. Its collection is diverse, but contains a number of paintings by early twentieth century American artists including Edward Hopper, Thomas Hart Benton, and Grant Wood.

16. The fanciful facade of the Indiana Theater dominates the far corner of Ohio Street. This structure with its brick and terra cotta Spanish Baroque exterior has provided a setting for live stage performances and film viewing since 1921. It was designed by Chicago architect John Eberson with ornate details inside and out. Theater audiences can still give free rein to their imagination while watching second run films on Terre Haute's only wide screen. Shops on the ground floor continue to attract tenants. Sidewalks out front have a special surface and street trees have been planted.

17. A block off Wabash in the other direction is the city's extensive Post Office and Federal Building erected in 1935. This three story structure at Seventh and Cherry is the finest example of Art Deco architecture in the Terre Haute. It was designed by the local firm of Miller and Yeager under oversight of the postal department's official architect James A. Whitmore. The limestone exterior, marble interior, aluminum grills and frames, vintage writing tables and wall sconces all display details of this style. Upstairs in the court room elegant period chandeliers and other appointments transport visitors back to an earlier era. No less striking than the architecture is the size and quiescence of the lobby. There is no better testament to the decline downtown Terre Haute has undergone in recent decades.

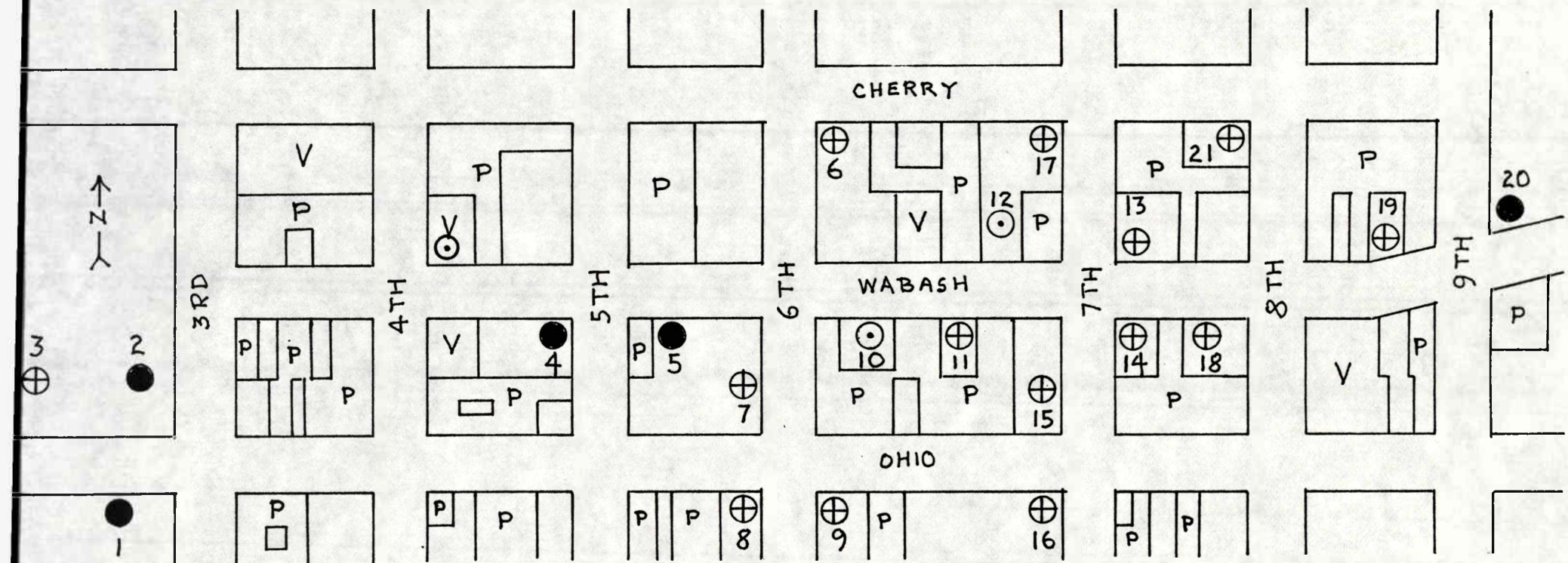
18. Back on Wabash beyond Merchants Bank the Tribune Building rises to a height of six stories. Here is one more of many Classical Revival edifices built during the early twentieth century. Similar to the others it has some distinguishing features. Marble trim decorates the front of this brick faced structure. And although erected as late as 1912 chimneys once used to vent individual office stoves protrude above the party walls. Multiple chimneys indicate that this was a conservatively built structure which could just as easily have been equipped with an up to date central heating system.

19. In a city where builders were once so prone to rely on the expertise of Chicago architects it is not suprising to find an example of the work of Daniel H. Burnham and Company. This practice, which had already designed such well known structures as the Flat Iron Building in New York City and Union Depot in Washington, D.C., drew the plans for Terre Haute's Terminal Arcade. Built on the 800 block of Wabash in 1911 the arcade is where interurban railway coaches once stopped. Shops originally lined both sides of its concourse which was roofed, but open at each end. Later, when the building functioned as an intercity bus station, the edifice was fully enclosed and shop partitions were removed. Front and back walls of this vacant structure retain their original Beaux Arts details rendered in limestone.

20. An imposing five story warehouse owned for more than a century by Hulman and Company marks the end of the former retail district and the start of a wholesale and manufacturing area. Built at Wabash and Ninth in 1892 the building is a well preserved example of Romanesque Revival architecture. Like the courthouse at the other end of downtown this structure was designed by Samuel Hannaford and Sons of Cincinnati. A row of subsidiary buildings continue north on Ninth and it is in one of these that the company's widely marketed Clabber Girl baking powder is made. Standing close to a railroad the business once depended on this form of transportation, but today relies entirely on shipments by truck.

21. A nearby structure at Eighth and Cherry reflects land use change rather than stability. Built early in this century as a warehouse it was eventually acquired and used until recently by Hulman and Company. Following the election of Governor Bayh, a native son, this property was leased and remodelled for office use by the State of Indiana. The purpose was to bring together various state agencies formerly scattered throughout the city. Not only was the edifice refurbished, but street trees were planted block and the next where parking was made available. Close by the Federal Building these state offices reinforce the service function at this end of downtown Terre Haute.

DOWNTOWN TERRE HAUTE 1994



SELECTED BUILDINGS

- > 100 yrs old
- ⊕ > 50 yrs old
- ⊙ recently constructed

P - Off street Parking Areas
V - Vacant Land

BUILDING NUMBERS IDENTIFIED IN "TEXT"

R.W. BASTIAN

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